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# America Inches, Uh, Crawls Toward Metric

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A yard is a yard because . . . because that's the distance an English bowman of yore drew his arrow. An inch is the width of a kingly thumb; a foot says where it came from. But the introduction of the metric system to this country is going to change all that history into a quaint memory.

Customers of the Old Stein Restaurant near Dupont Circle are already quaffing liters of beer, not quarts, and whether they know it or not, they are getting a small wet headstart on the rest of us.

The liter and its cousins — the meter, millimeter, centimeter, kilometer, milliliter, gram, microgram, milligram and kilogram (to name a few) — are all units of metric, the international system of measurement which every major nation except the United States either is now using or is committed to use.

Which means that we measure things differently than they do, and that creates lots of problems in international trade and travel and other areas.

**WORLDWIDE,** the metric system first began to take hold in France in the 1790s.

In this country, Congress in 1866 passed an act making it legal to use the system for the transaction of business. And, ever since, Americans have debated the pros and cons of fully converting to the system.

In 1975 the controversy still simmers although the question is more when and how the U.S. should "go metric" and whether the federal government should subsidize the program.

Some people call for a "Metric America" in 10 years, others predict 100. Some say the changeover from the customary system to metric should be voluntary, others say mandatory. Some private firms already are using metric, others want no part of it. Some schools emphasize metric, others don't. There is at present no government machinery to guide the country through the maze.

**BUT THE** trend is set. The system will affect

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Star-News Photographer Ray Lustig

**Robert Zanville, manager of the Old Stein, holds a 2-liter mug (left) and a 5-liter mug.**

# METRIC

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everyone whenever this country does go predominently metric. And there are signs of the growing trend all around us — in the supermarkets, on wine racks, in sports, clothing, pharmacies, cameras, mechanics' tools, on signs on highways — as well as at The Old Stein.

More than half of canned foods are labeled in both customary and metric units, according to the National Bureau of Standards. Giant Food labels its milk cartons in metric units too. Scott Paper Co. labels its products in centimeters.

The Seven-Up Co. has announced it will convert from the customary system to metric in two of its bottle sizes — from the half-quart and quart bottles to half-liter and liter containers early this year. As far as wine goes, the Treasury Department's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms division has ruled that all wine sold in the U.S. must be bottled in seven metric sizes by next year. That applies to imported as well as domestic vintages.

**IN CLOTHING,** Levi's boys bell bottoms have dual size tickets showing inches and centimeters.

In sports, there's the 1,500-meter distance. In baseball; the Cincinnati Reds last season posted the outfield distances at Riverfront Stadium in meters. The Olympic Games are conducted in a base of metric units.

Destination signs showing the distance in miles and kilometers can be seen on some highways throughout the country. As part of the National Park Service's plan to introduce metric measurement throughout the U.S., the Colonial National Historical Park in Yorktown, Va. has been using both metric and customary measurement distances on all road signs in the park. Ohio also has signs on highways showing distances in dual measurements.

Many automobile mechanics already have bought tools that fit metric parts. More than one-fourth of the cars on the nation's highways require metric tools, according to officials of the National Bureau of Standards. Spark plugs have metric threads and metric wrenches are used on foreign cars.

**OTHER PRODUCTS** that are specified in metric units are prescription drugs, cigarettes, film and skis.

There are metric educational games, metric cookbooks, metric scales, Dixie Cups with metric questions, metric cartoons, metric songs, metric bumper stickers and even metric jokes like this one: What's the quickest way to lose pounds and take off inches? Change to the metric system. Or: Why do some people think the meter stick is such a stubborn ruler? Because it won't give an inch.

A metric song, "Going Metric," was written by Audrey Anderson, a second-grade teacher at Cresthaven Elementary School, in Silver Spring, which is a leader among schools teaching metric.

**WHILE SCHOOLS** in Maryland, Virginia and the District are putting more emphasis on teaching the new system, Cresthaven is said to be the first school in Maryland and perhaps in this area that is teaching the first three grades metric first as the primary system of measurement. As principal Kelly Guido explained, the children are learning metric as the basic language of measurement.

Parents of Cresthaven youngsters are learning metric too. At one recent parent workshop attended by 21 enthusiastic mothers, teacher Lori Clement explained that she wanted the parents to become "familiar with the (metric) terms and visualize what the unit of measurement would be."

While Mrs. Clement doesn't teach the students how to convert from the customary system to metric, she does teach the parents. "The adults want to know," she said.

**MARIAN NEWMAN,** mother of a third-grader, said her son likes metric because "it's a challenge." As for her, "It's easy. Much easier than the other."

Ellie Alpert, whose son is in second grade, attended the workshop after her son and his friends came home from school one day with a request that she make "metric muffins" like the ones they had made in class.

"All I recognized in the recipe was one stick of butter," she said.

Last August, the push for more metric in the schools got an added boost when Congress passed an amendment ot the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 which said, "It is the policy of the U.S. to encourage educational agencies and institutions to prepare students to use the metric system with ease and facility as part of the regular education program."

**FURTHERMORE,** one of 23 recommendations recently by a consortium of 24 states is that all schools in the country should be using the metric system of measurement by Jan. 1, 1980.

In some states like Maryland, the state board of education has approved a plan for the public schools to be metric by 1980.

While education seems to be going more and more metric, there are other segments of society not opposed to metric per se, but fearful that conversion may cost workers jobs, put a financial burden on those who have to buy new tools and aggravate the uncertain economy.

The AFL-CIO has strongly opposed moves toward metric conversion, saying that members feel there are "too many unanswered questions and insufficient evidence" to commit the U.S. to such a policy. The converting has been estimated to run between $45 billion and $100 billion.

**SMALL BUSINESS** has urged federal financial assistance for firms that need it whenever they are required to convert, according to John J. Motley III of the National Federation of Independent Business which has a membership of 410,000 firms. He said that since small business is not involved in exporting or foreign trade, it "gains absolutely no benefit from it."

The metric system coordinates the measurements of length (meter), area (square meter), capacity (liter) and weight (gram) into one decimalized system. The metric unit of temperature is celsius instead of fahrenheit. To compute with metric units, add zeros or move the decimal point to the right or left.

This is how it works:

Say you want to change a meter into the next smallest unit of length, the decimeter. A meter is 1.0 m. To change it to decimeter, you move the decimal point one place to the right which makes it 10 decimeters. There are 10 decimeters in a meter.

On the other hand, if you want to change 1.0 m to a larger unit of length, the dekameter, you move the decimal point once to the left and you get .10. A meter is one-tenth of a dekameter.

**APPLYING** metric to everyday life is like this:

A six-foot, 200 pound person is about 180 centimeters tall and weighs about 90 kilograms. A dime is about 1 millimeter thick and has a mass of about 2 grams. A teaspoon is 5 milliliters, a tablespoon 15 milliliters and a cup, 250 milliliters.

Using centimeters, Miss America's measurements might be 94-63,91 (there are 2.5 centimeters in an inch). A tankful of gas would measure 60 liters rather than 16 gallons. On speedometers, a reading of 80 kilometers per hour would replace 50 miles per hour.

Among citizens questioned at large, some had apprehensions about metric while others liked the idea of converting.

**A WOMAN** motorist at a Sun Oil station in a suburb of Philadelphia, when asked recently what she thought about the station pumping and pricing gas in liters instead of gallons as an experiment, said, "That's un-American."

Joan Rutledge of Silver Spring observed, "I feel we're going to be ripped off by the manufacturers. It's the perfect time to give you less because you won't know what the heck you're buying."

A Gaithersburg American history teacher said, "When I was in high school and college I learned it (metric) in science and hoped I could get through life without using it. I would imagine metric would be easier if you never learned the other. It would be converting (from the customary system to metric) that would be difficult."

**JOSEPH RAY,** 30, a third-year law student at Howard University, said "I think metric is good. It makes us more international."

An Alexandria woman said, "Having a common system of measurement encourages international trade and understanding. It is one more link in international relations that has to come."

**Joe O'Donnell,** of the D.C. Department Environmental Services, said: "If you don't learn it, you'll be lost. It will affect everybody."

John A. McCahill, a Washington lawyer, said, "I suspect in the long run metric will be best because a lot of other countries are using it. I view its advent with some sense of loss — I'm not going to be able to get used to saying I weigh so many kilograms."

**WHETHER** this country goes metric 5, 10, or 15 years from now depends a great deal on what happens to legislation about to be introduced in this session of Congress.

A spokesman for Rep. Olin Teague D-Tex., chairman of the House committee on science and technology, said, "It (the metric bill) is one of the top priorities of the science and technology committee. He (Teague) is going to get this darn thing passed."

A committee source said that the bill would establish a national metric conversion board to coordinate or assist any sector of the industry that wishes to change. The bill says the conversion will be entirely voluntary, the source said, and the board would have no enforcement or regulatory powers. The life of the board would be 10 years and after that time, the U.S. would be "predominently, but not exclusively" on the metric system.

The last time a similar metric conversion bill was introduced it was defeated on a procedural technicality.

Until such legislation is passed, the American National Metric Council, which was established in 1973, will continue to be the coordinator of metric activities throughout the country.

**A voluntary non-profit** organization, ANMC was established under the auspices of the American National Standards Institute to serve as a coordinating, planning and information center for all organized elements involved with conversion. The council, which is having its first conference here in March, stresses it does not intend to assume the responsibility of a government-sponsored board, but hopes to facilitate the work of one that might eventually be established.

While many companies are waiting to see if metric legislation is passed, the ANMC pointed out in its most annual report that "in light of the current economic uncertainty in the U.S. and the world, it can be assumed Congress will be closely scrutinizing any national metric conversion program with respect to its likely impact on an inflated economy. . . .

No matter when metric conversion comes, "we have to use the rule of reason," said Louis E. Barbrow, metric coordinator at the National Bureau of Standards, who feels the "time is never going to come when it will be illegal to play football (the way we do now).

"The lines on the field are 10 yards apart. If we change the field, sportscasters would have to say, 'First down and 9.144 meters to go.' That's not what we envision doing."